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LENT USAGES.

BY THE

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LENT USAGES.

LENT usages ! And what are Lent usages ? Such, it is to be feared, as serve, for the most part, to foster lamentable self-deception, and perilous delusion in regard to the soul's health and salvation !—such as involve, in innumerable instances, the substitution of sheer formalism for genuine religion,—temporary mortification of the flesh, and partial self-denial, for repentance of heart towards God, and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us look a little into this matter, and the fact will be apparent.

The observance of Lent, generally, resolves itself into two particulars. Fasting—so called ; and partial abstinence from customary worldly gratifications.

In regard to fasting. This ordinarily consists in the substitution of one kind of food for another ; fish for flesh, on certain days, Fridays generally, and sometimes Wednesdays also. Now, conceding here all the benefit to the fact of fasting that its most strenuous advocates can themselves claim for it, I observe at once that this is not fasting at all ; to call it so is a perversion of the term, and solemn mockery. Fasting is abstinence from food, not change of food ; and for a man to sit down and make a hearty meal on fish, eggs, and a variety of other things, and just because *flesh* was not included, to assume that he has fasted, is a sort of delusion that, were it not undeniably the fact, would seem utterly impossible for an intelligent being to practise on himself.

That this kind of *fasting* has no scriptural foundation it is needless to assert : it is purely an offset from Popery, and to Popery alone it appertains ; as the following

statement found in the *Times* newspaper of the 27th February, will abundantly show.

“LENT.—The *mandement* of the Archbishop of Paris for the observance of Lent has just been published. It permits the eating of eggs, butter, and milk during Lent, except for the three last days of Passion-week, and butcher’s meat on the Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, and Thursdays, except in Passion-week. Persons who wish to eat meat every day may do so by distributing alms, to be employed towards the purchase of the old convent of the Carmelites, and for the relief of the poor.”

Here indeed is the principle of substitution fully carried out; not only is it allowed, in the matter of fasting, that one kind of food may be substituted for another, but that payment of money may be substituted for fasting itself!—procuring to the buyer, of course, all the benefits which the duty is supposed to involve! What awful absurdity, what fearful mockery is this! Fasting, if *in itself* a benefit, must without controversy be itself practised; if *in effect* a benefit, then also without controversy must the procurement of the benefit be dependent on the use of the means! So that, on any interpretation of the thing, if a man is to pay at all, it ought to be rather for permission to fast, than for permission to escape it. But the *mandement* is just in keeping with the principle of a church which remits, for a price, not only the penalty of fasting, but the penalty of sin; which barter to her children, not only liberty from bodily self-denial, but exemption even from purgatorial fire itself! Pity it is the principle and practice too are not left with that church!—pity it is, sad pity, that those at least who avowedly protest against her errors, and reject her delusions, should be manifestly chargeable with both, by fasting after the puerile fashion above explained.

But it must be admitted that there are others who, as far as the fact goes, fast in reality at this season,—literally and rigidly, at times, abstain from all food; and yet

whose fasting is far removed from being scriptural in its character, or beneficial in its results. The persons I allude to are those who fast regularly on certain prescribed days, and make it quite notorious that they do so; it is unequivocally proclaimed by themselves; and the open avowal of the fact seems to be considered as important to its efficacy.

Now what says Scripture on the matter? Do we find this kind of fasting there recognized—there approved? I think not, but quite the reverse. That Scripture recognizes the desirableness, and approves the practice of fasting I quite maintain; but that it recognizes, much less approves, fasting on the principle and after the manner now in question, I quite deny. The texts of Scripture which bear on the subject are directly opposed to it. They teach us expressly that fasting, whenever practised for private ends, that is, for individual profit (as distinct from an act of general humiliation), is to be a strictly private exercise; that instead of publicity being given to the discharge of the duty, we are so to demean ourselves as that none need know it. “Moreover when ye fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance; for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you they have their reward.

“But thou when thou fastest, anoint thine head, and wash thy face; that thou appear not unto men to fast, but unto thy Father, which seeth in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly.”

“*That ye appear not unto men to fast!*” How does this accord with the exercise of fasting being generally known? And how, then, does the practice in Lent of notoriously fasting on certain days accord with Scripture? Surely it does not, but is rather in direct opposition to it; and, in as much as it is so, is infinitely more likely to induce formalism and Pharisaism, than to promote growth in godliness, and advancement in the Divine life.

If men fast, let it be done on scriptural principles, and for scriptural ends. I say, *if* men fast,—for the obligation to do so at all, is simply dependent on the ex-

perience of its benefit, and must be exclusively determined thereby: it is not an absolute, not an essential duty: there is not a single injunction in the New Testament to that effect: we are nowhere bidden to fast. We are instructed how to act when we do fast; but whether we are to fast or not, is left to be determined by every man's experience of its results in his own individual case. In many cases, without doubt, it is an exercise exceedingly profitable; in many other cases, without doubt, it would prove just the reverse. The Lord, who, in his appointments and ordinances, invariably, as it would seem, contemplates spiritual results, knew this; and, therefore, left no specific injunction in regard to the duty. He has thus mercifully exempted his Church from what otherwise would have proved, in frequent instances, a painful and unprofitable, nay injurious burden; and the liberty he has so graciously conceded, we are privileged to enjoy, and bound to maintain.

"Be not entangled, then, with the yoke of bondage." Make not *that* arbitrary and absolute, which God hath left free. If fasting be really found profitable—and by all means let believers make the experiment; if the result be found truly beneficial—if the exercise be productive of a more exalted spiritual frame, of greater aptitude and disposition for prayer, greater desire after heavenly enjoyments, greater longing after Divine communications and Divine food—then fast! yea, fast as often as you will; but let your fasting be in strict accordance with Christ's instructions—let it be private! Let it not be so arranged, so proclaimed, that "you appear unto men to fast." But if the case be otherwise with you—if the result of fasting be the reverse of this—if lassitude, weariness, incapacity for exertion, and indisposition for spiritual exercises be the consequence, then understand your liberty, and without scruple enjoy it. Fast not! Christ lays not the burden: why needlessly impose it on yourself?

Another particular generally included in Lent observances, and much relied on, is abstinence, in a greater

or less degree, from customary worldly pleasures, and worldly gratifications: nay, the renunciation of worldly intercourse, and social visiting, and comparative seclusion, during this season, is insisted on by some as highly conducive, if not essential, to the welfare of the soul!

But if this be the case, why, I would ask, limit such salutary restraints, such wholesome regulations to Lent? If such abstinence, such retirement, be really conducive to godly growth at one time, why not equally so at another? If requisite at one time, therefore, why not equally so at another? Is the soul, then, in peculiar jeopardy during Lent, so that watchings, and fastings, and self-denials are then especially needful, which may, with perfect security, or without damage, be dispensed with during the rest of the year? Or are gaities, and vanities, and worldly amusements, and worldly conformities, less injurious to the spiritual life, less inconsistent with Gospel principles, less prejudicial to heavenly meetness, during the rest of the year than during Lent? Or is it that the Gospel itself prescribes, or sanctions, these periodical seasons of self-denial and spiritual exertion in the Divine life, to be relaxed and intermitted by protracted intervals of worldliness and self-gratification—a month, for instance, of fasting and seclusion, to be succeeded by eleven of worldly conformity, and fashionable folly? Did our blessed Saviour then, when in his last supplication for his disciples, he characterized them as “not of the world, even as he was not of the world,” really mean this—that they were not to be of the world during Lent! or any other particular period, as distinct from the rest of their time, so that during the rest of their time they might with propriety, and Christian consistency, be “of the world?” Judging from his own character, here proposed as their example, and exhibited, indeed, as their pattern, can the shadow of a foundation be shown for such a supposition? Look at the Saviour’s character; examine it throughout; mark well his life in all its incidents, in all its bearings, from Bethlehem to Calvary; where, or when, was seen on him the impress

of the world? A man he was, devoted to the world's interests—aye, devoted unto the death! A man he was, to be found often amidst the world, labouring in its behalf, ministering to its necessities, reproving its iniquities, bearing its griefs! A man *in* the world *frequent*: but *of* the world *never*! Where, then, or what the Christian's warrant to be of the world ever,—at one time more than another? Or what the foundation for the vain distinction attempted to be drawn, in reference to the lawfulness of worldly conformity betwixt one season and another—betwixt Lent, and the rest of the year?

Alas! the history, as to the cause, of all this delusion, and self-deception—of this complacency in periodical abstinence from worldliness and self-gratification, with the full purpose of a speedy and joyous return to it, is to be traced to utterly mistaken views of religion from first to last; to the miserably erroneous notion so commonly and readily adopted, that religion consists in a kind of periodical effort, or separate practice—practice separate from the general habits, experience, occupations, and pleasures of life—practice involving a detached service of so much time, and so much work; a something to be done, now and then, at certain times, and seasons, and under certain circumstances,—on Sundays and Lent-days, and on certain hours of other days, and by certain exercises at these times, and during these hours! instead of being what alone it is, the very life of God in the soul of man; a high, holy, heavenly principle, drawing the soul with all its affections to God, as the God of its salvation; inducing a cordial, delightful, voluntary surrender of itself at all times, and in all circumstances to his will; and constraining an effort, not periodical and partial, but universal, unvarying, determined to be by grace conformed daily, hourly, momentarily, more and more after the image of Him, who is himself the image of God, “the brightness of his Father's glory, the express image of his person.” This is the mistake, the fatal, melancholy mistake; no marvel, then, at the consequences that flow from it; they follow of course. Since religion is

only a partial thing, worldly renunciation need only be partial too. The season of Lent, rigidly observed, with its fastings and severities, its retirements and duties, will go far towards meeting the requirements. It will satisfy the demand of conscience on this head, and be, at least, a satisfactory set-off against the habitual follies and worldly conformity of the rest of the year!

But, it will be asked, may not periodical seasons of religious retirement be profitably adopted? May not the Christian advantageously set apart certain times in the year for especial attention to his spiritual interests; and, in order to this, prescribe to himself at such times more than ordinary seclusion from secular concerns, and worldly associations? Men of business, for instance; is not such a course highly beneficial, and desirable in their case at least? To this I reply at once,—that, however cases and circumstances may occur, wherein the desirableness of such a course may be admitted, still at last, be the cases and circumstances what they may, it will infallibly be found, that not the yearly, nor the monthly, nor even the weekly alone, but the *daily* recurring periods of religious retirement are the periods, on the observance of which the soul's *health* and *interest* really depend! that it is the habit of daily intercourse and communion with God, the appointment of daily seasons for holy exercises and serious meditation, regularly adhered to and diligently improved, that effectually secure growth in grace, and final maturity in the Divine life! Alone with God in the chamber, deliberately, calmly, thoughtfully,—once, twice, thrice in the day; the door shut, the Bible open; the world with its business, as well as its pleasures, excluded; the presence of the Saviour realized, the Spirit's influence sought! This is the system of retirement, these the seasons which will really be found profitable to the soul; and if a man's business be such—so various and extended, so overwhelming and engrossing—that he cannot arrange for these, nothing remains that I can suggest, but that he diminish that business, and the sooner the better! for otherwise he is endangering his soul for this world's gain;

and assuredly no periodical seasons of supposed devotion, be they yearly, monthly, or weekly, will serve to remedy the evil, or prevent the catastrophe he is hurrying upon himself.

In regard to renunciation of the world, the same principle must be maintained. It is not the temporary separation from its customary follies; it is not the periodical abandonment of its pleasures, and seclusion from its society; but it is the habitual renunciation of *worldliness itself*, by the systematic relinquishment of all those things, at all times, which tend to engender its spirit, and foster its practice, which stamps with reality the Christian's profession, and invests with certainty the Christian's hope! Where this is practised, *little else* is wanting, and *little else* need, I believe, be added, in the way of periodical seclusion; while, where this is not practised, *nothing else* in the way of periodical seclusion will be found to supply the deficiency; or to involve ought to the soul, save lamentable delusion in this world, and still more lamentable ruin in that to come.

In a word, then, be not deceived! mistake not ordinances, forms, ceremonies, self-denials, and observance of times and seasons for vital godliness. It is the latter alone will save you; and the former are just useful so far, and only so far, as they serve to promote it. Rest not in means, but look to the end means are intended to subserve. Fasting is good, if it instrumentally bring the soul and its affections nearer to God; if not, it is a vain show and profitless burden! Renunciation of the world is good, oh! very good, if adopted from sincere desire of spiritual advancement, and habitually practised as consonant with gospel requirements, and favourable to gospel growth; but if on other principles, it is sheer formalism, and miserable bondage,—a blind of Satan's whereby he retains in his grasp souls, already taken captive by him at his will. Gladly, most gladly, does he behold deluded mortals imposing on themselves all sorts of restrictions, and all sorts of penalties, while their hearts are estranged from Jesus, and enmity to God still reigns paramount within! Voluntary humiliation, osten-

tatious fasting, temporary self-denial, and periodical abstinence from worldly pleasures inherently loved, and fondly cherished!—this suits his purpose well; nothing better! for thus is *present* suffering, as well as final ruin, abundantly secured to his victims; and through the instrumentality, not of carnal enjoyments and self-gratification, but literally of carnal penalties and self-denial, does the sentence of condemnation become riveted on their souls! Oh! pitiable state, most pitiable—self-imposed sufferings now, sin-imposed wrath hereafter! To travel through life many a wearisome day, burdened with irksome duties, painful restraints, cumbrous ordinances, hated mortifications, and then, at last, to fail of the expected reward—to miss the end! To find, after all done, and all suffered, that still has the one thing needful eluded the grasp! That despite all its other pretensions, possessions, and fancied attainments, still is the soul without God, without Christ, without holiness, without hope, without salvation, without glory! This will be sad, sad indeed! and yet this will be the discovery, indubitably, certainly the discovery, made at the hour of death, and day of judgment, by all who content themselves with substituting the form of religion, for the power; periodical observances, for habitual godliness; and external compliance with prescriptive rites, for internal spirituality of mind, and thorough devotedness of heart to the living God!

What, then, is your religion worth? What is its nature, character, experience? Examine and decide. “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away, behold all things are become new.” Is it so with you? Are you renewed in the spirit of your mind? Is Christ the object of supreme affection—is Christ the object of habitual imitation? If so, it is well; your religion is sound, scriptural, saving; it will stand you in good stead in the hour of need. If not, your religion is worthless; and despite all your Lent fastings, and Lent observances, it will, if not exchanged for a better, leave you where it has left its millions before you, to sink at last into the gulf of interminable woe.

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